

BEYOND FREEDOM & DIGNITY

by B.F. Skinner

1. A Technology of Behavior (p.6)

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A Technology of Behavior

Every new source from which man has increased his power on the earth has been used to diminish the prospects of his successors. All his progress has been made at the expense of damage to his environment which he cannot repair and could not foresee.

Twenty-five hundred years ago it might have been said that man understood himself as well as any other part of his world. Today he is the thing he understands least.

Whereas Greek physics and biology, no matter how crude, led eventually to modern science, Greek theories of human behavior led nowhere. If they are with us today, it is not because they possessed some kind of eternal verity, but because they did not contain the seeds of anything better.

The exciting thing about getting to the moon was its feasibility. Science and technology had reached the point at which, with one great push, the thing could be done. There is no comparable excitement about the problems posed by human behavior. We are not close to solutions.

Our age is not suffering from anxiety but from the accidents, crimes, wars, and other dangerous and painful things to which people are so often exposed. Young people drop out of school, refuse to get jobs, and associate only with others of their own age not because they feel alienated but because of defective social environments in homes, schools, factories, and elsewhere.

Freedom

In one form or another intentional aversive control is the pattern of most social coordination - in ethics, religion, government, economics, education, psychotherapy, and family life.

It is possible that man's genetic endowment supports this kind of struggle for freedom: when treated aversively people tend to act aggressively or to be reinforced by signs of having worked aggressive damage.

The literature of freedom has never come to grips with techniques of control which do not generate escape or counterattack because it has dealt with the problem in terms of states of mind and feelings. In his book SOVEREIGNTY, Bertrand de Jouvenel quotes two important figures

in that literature. According to Leibnitz, "Liberty consists in the power to do what one wants to do," and according to Voltaire, "When I can do what I want to do, there is my liberty for me." But both writers add a concluding phrase: Leibnitz, "...or in the power to want what can be got," and Voltaire, more candidly, "...but I can't help wanting what I do want." Jouvenel relegates these comments to a footnote, saying that the power to want is a matter of "interior liberty" (the freedom of the inner man!) which falls outside the "gambit of freedom."

Freedom is a matter of contingencies of reinforcement, not of the feelings the contingencies generate. The distinction is particularly important when the contingencies do not generate escape or counter-attack.

Those who manipulate human behavior are said to be evil men, necessarily bent on exploitation. Control is clearly the opposite of freedom, and if freedom is good, control must be bad. What is overlooked is control which does not have aversive consequences at any time. Many social practices essential to the welfare of the species involve the control of one person by another, and no one can suppress them who has any concern for human achievements.

Man's struggle for freedom is not due to a will to be free, but to certain behavioral processes characteristic of the human organism, the chief effect of which is the avoidance of or escape from so-called "aversive" features of the environment. Physical and biological technologies have been mainly concerned with natural aversive stimuli; the struggle for freedom is concerned with stimuli intentionally arranged by other people.

It is unprepared for the next step, which is not to free men from control but to analyze and change the kinds of control to which they are exposed.

Dignity

As La Rochefoucauld observed, "No man deserves to be praised for his goodness unless he has strength of character to be wicked. All other goodness is generally nothing but indolence or impotence of will."

What we may call the literature of dignity is concerned with preserving due credit. It may oppose advances in technology, including a technology of behavior, because they destroy chances to be admired and a basic analysis because it offers an alternative explanation of behavior for which the individual himself has previously been given credit. The literature thus stands in the way of further human achievements.

Punishment

A child who has been severely punished for sex play is not necessarily less inclined to continue; and a man who has been imprisoned for violent assault is not necessarily less inclined toward violence. Punished behavior is likely to reappear after the punitive contingencies are withdrawn.

We try to design such a world for those who cannot solve the problem of punishment for themselves, such as babies, retardates, or psychotics, and if it could be done for everyone, much time and energy would be saved.

The trouble is that when we punish a person for behaving badly, we leave it up to him to discover how to behave well, and he can then get credit for behaving well.

But if he behaves well for the reasons we have just examined, it is the environment that must get the credit. At issue is an attribute of autonomous man. Men are to behave well only because they are good. Under a "perfect" system no one needs goodness.

The problem is to induce people not to be good but to behave well.

We attribute no goodness at all to those who behave well only under constant supervision by a punitive agent such as the police.

The effect may be the same: people may not gamble, drink, or go to prostitutes, but the fact that they cannot do so in one environment and do not do so in the other is a fact about techniques of control, not about goodness or freedom. In one environment the reasons for behaving well are clear; in another they are easily overlooked and forgotten.

It is the environment which is "responsible" for the objectional behavior, and it is the environment, not some attribute of the individual, which must be changed. We recognize this when we talk about the punitive contingencies in the natural environment. Running head-on into a wall is punished by a blow to the skull, but we do not hold a man responsible for not running into walls nor do we say that nature holds him responsible. Nature simply punishes him when he runs into a wall. When we make the world less punishing or teach people how to avoid natural punishments, as by giving them rules to follow, we are not destroying responsibility or threatening any other occult quality. We are simply making the world safer.

What must be changed is not the responsibility of autonomous man but the conditions, environmental or genetic, of which a person's behavior is a function.

But of course we must ask in turn why teachers, parents, governors, and entrepreneurs are bad. The mistake, as we shall see later, is to put the responsibility anywhere, to suppose that somewhere a casual sequence is initiated.

A person who has been punished is not thereby simply less inclined to behave in a given way; at best, he learns now to avoid punishment.

But our task is not to encourage moral struggle or to build or demonstrate inner virtues. It is to make life less punishing and in doing so to release for more reinforcing activities the time and energy consumed in the avoidance of punishment.

Alternatives to Punishment

Permissiveness is not, however, a policy; it is the abandonment of policy, and its apparent advantages are illusory. To refuse to control is to leave control not to the person himself, but to other parts of the social and non-social environments.

The Controller As Midwife

Freud shares with Socrates three principles: know thyself; virtue is knowledge; and the maieutic method, or the art of midwifery, which is, of course, the (psycho-) analytic process.

As Ralph Barton Perry put it, "Whoever determines what alternatives shall be made known to man controls what that man shall choose from. He is deprived of freedom in proportion as he is denied access to any ideas, or is confined to any range of ideas short of the totality of relevant possibilities." For "deprived of freedom" read "controlled."

Building Dependence on Things

One of the advantages in being dependent on things rather than on other people is that the time and energy of other people are saved.

Changing Minds

Evidently freedom and dignity are threatened only when behavior is changed by physically changing the environment. There appears to be no threat when the states of mind said to be responsible for behavior are changed, presumably because autonomous man possesses miraculous powers which enable him to yield or resist.

We change behavior toward something, not an attitude toward it. We sample and change verbal behavior, not opinions.

Like permissiveness, maieutics, guidance, and building a dependence on things, changing a mind is condoned by the defenders of freedom and dignity because it is an ineffective way of changing behavior, and the changer of minds can therefore escape from the charge that he is controlling people. He is also exonerated when things go wrong. Autonomous man survives to be credited with his achievements and blamed for his mistakes.

To the extent that government is defined by the power to punish, the literature of freedom has been valuable in promoting a shift to other measures, but in no other sense has it freed people from governmental control.

When a therapist shows that he cares, he reinforces any behavior the patient has just emitted.

The fundamental mistake made by all those who choose weak methods of control is to assume that the balance of control is left to the individual, when in fact it is left to other conditions. The other conditions are often hard to see, but to continue to neglect them and to attribute

their effects to autonomous man is to court disaster. When practices are concealed or disguised, countercontrol is made difficult; it is not clear from whom one is to escape or whom one is to attack. The literatures of freedom and dignity were once brilliant exercises in countercontrol, but the measures they proposed are no longer appropriate to the task. On the contrary, they may have serious consequences, to which we must now turn.

Values

A more useful form of the question is this: If a scientific analysis can tell us how to change behavior, can it tell us what changes to make?

A person who is teaching a child to distinguish among his feelings is a little like a color-blind person teaching a child to name colors. The teacher cannot be sure of the presence or absence of the condition which determines whether a response is to be reinforced or not.

Men have generalized the feelings of good things and called them pleasure and the feelings of bad things and called them pain, but we do not give a man pleasure or pain, we give him things he feels as pleasant or painful.

What is maximized or minimized, or what is ultimately good or bad, are things, not feelings, and men work to achieve them or to avoid them not because of the way they feel but because they are positive or negative reinforcers.

Nothing in the behavioral processes guarantees fair treatment, since the amount of behavior generated by a reinforcer depends upon the contingencies in which it appears. In an extreme case a person may be reinforced by others on a schedule which costs him his life.

The "something to believe in and be devoted to" is to be found among the contrived contingencies which induce people to behave "for the good of others."

The good things in life have only to be made properly contingent on productive labor.

No reasonable balance can be achieved as long as the remoter gains are neglected by a thoroughgoing individualism or libertarianism, or as long as the balance is thrown as violently in the other direction by an exploitative system.

The Evolution of a Culture

More important, a practice can be transmitted through "diffusion" to other cultures - as if antelopes, observing the usefulness of the long neck in giraffes, were to grow longer necks. Species are isolated from each other by the nontransmissibility of genetic traits, but there is no comparable isolation of cultures. A culture is a set of practices, but it is not a set which cannot be mixed with other sets.

Why should people in the last third of the twentieth century care about what people in the last third of the twenty-first century will look like, how they will be governed, how and why they will work productively, what they will know, or what their books, pictures, and music will be like? No current reinforcers can be derived from anything so remote. Why, then, should a person regard the survival of his culture as a "good"?

The simple fact is that a culture which for any reason induces its members to work for its survival, or for the survival of some of its practices, is more likely to survive. Survival is the only value according to which a culture is eventually to be judged, and any practice that furthers survival has survival value by definition.

Facts of this sort are useful, but change occurs not because of the passage of time, but because of what happens while time is passing.

Behavior is followed by reinforcement; it does not pursue and overtake it. We explain the development of a species and of the behavior of a member of the species by pointing to the selective action of contingencies of survival and contingencies of reinforcement. Both the species and the behavior of the individual develop when they are shaped and maintained by their effects on the world around them. That is the only role of the future.

The task of the cultural designer is to accelerate the development of practices which bring the remote consequences of behavior into play. We turn now to some of the problems he faces.

The Design of a Culture

There are many varieties of "behavior modification" and many different formulations, but they all agree on the essential point: behavior can be changed by changing the conditions of which it is a function.

A culture must be reasonably stable, but it just also change, and it will presumably be strongest if it can avoid excessive respect for tradition and fear of novelty on the one hand and excessively rapid change on the other. Lastly, a culture will have a special measure of survival value if it encourages its members to examine its practices and to experiment with new ones.

Designing a culture is like designing an experiment; contingencies are arranged and effects noted. In an experiment we are interested in what happens in designing a culture with whether it will work. This is the difference between science and technology.

The reinforcing values of goods are more flexible than the values set by economic agencies. The word of authority is more unyielding than the facts of which it speaks.

A failure is not always a mistake; it may simply be the best one can do under the circumstances. The real mistake is to stop trying. Perhaps we cannot now design a successful culture as a whole, but we can design better practices in a piecemeal fashion.

The important thing is not so much to know how to solve a problem as to know how to look for a solution. The scientists who approached President Roosevelt with a proposal to build a bomb so powerful that

it could end the Second World War within a few days could not say that they knew how to build it. The behavioral problems to be solved in the world today are no doubt more complex than the practical use of nuclear fission, and the basic science by no means as far advanced, but we know where to start looking for solutions.

To prevent the misuse of controlling power, however, we must look not at the controller himself but at the contingencies under which he engages in control.

As Francis Bacon put it, nature to be commanded must be obeyed.

Control and countercontrol tend to become dislocated when control is taken over by organized agencies.

Man has not evolved as an ethical or moral animal. He has evolved to the point at which he has constructed an ethical or moral culture. He differs from the other animals not in possessing a moral or ethical sense but in having been able to generate a moral or ethical social environment.

The number of people explicitly engaged in improving the design of automobiles, for example, must greatly exceed the number of those

concerned with improving life in city ghettos. It is not that the automobile is more important than a way of life, but rather that the economic contingencies which induce people to improve automobiles are very powerful. They arise from the personal reinforcers of those who manufacture automobiles. No reinforcers of comparable strength encourage the engineering of the pure survival of a culture. The technology of the automobile industry is also, of course, much further advanced than a technology of behavior. These facts simply underline the importance of the threat posed by the literatures of freedom and dignity.

Leisure is a condition for which the human species has been badly prepared, because until very recently it was enjoyed by only a few, who contributed very little to the gene pool. Large numbers of people are now at leisure for appreciable periods of time, but there has been no chance for effective selection of either a relevant genetic endowment or a relevant culture.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are basic rights. But they are the rights of the individual and were listed as such at a time when the literatures of freedom and dignity were concerned with the aggrandizement of the individual. They have only a minor bearing on the survival of a culture.

Attaching controlling practices is, of course, a form of countercontrol. It may have immeasurable benefits if better controlling practices are thereby selected. But the literatures of freedom and dignity have made the mistake of supposing that they are suppressing control rather than correcting it. The reciprocal control through which a culture evolves is then disturbed. To refuse to exercise available control because in some sense all control is wrong is to withhold possibly important forms of countercontrol.

What is Man

The question is not whether a man can know himself but what he knows when he does so.

We say that a person forms a concept or an abstraction, but all we see is that certain kinds of contingencies of reinforcement have brought a response under the control of a single property of a stimulus.

Rather than suppose that it is therefore autonomous man who discriminates, generalizes, forms concepts or abstractions, recalls or remembers, and associates, we can put matters in good order simply by noting that these terms do not refer to forms of behavior.

The culture promotes thinking by constructing special contingencies. It teaches a person to make fine discriminations by making differential reinforcement more precise. It teaches techniques to be used in solving problems. It provides rules which make it unnecessary to be exposed to the contingencies from which the rules are derived, and it provides rules for finding rules.

None of this has been investigated in a very productive way, but the inadequacy of our analysis is no reason to fall back on a miracle-working mind. If our understanding of contingencies of reinforcement is not yet sufficient to explain all kinds of thinking, we must remember that the appeal to mind explains nothing at all.

We are closer to human nature in a baby than in an adult, or in a primitive culture than in an advanced, in the sense that environmental contingencies are less likely to have obscured the genetic endowment, and it is tempting to dramatize that endowment by implying that earlier stages have survived in concealed form: man is a naked ape and "the paleolithic bull which survives in man's inner self still paws the earth whenever a threatening gesture is made on the social scene." But anatomists and physiologists will not find an ape, or a bull, or for that matter instincts. They will find anatomical and physiological features which are the product of an evolutionary history.

These are not very helpful expressions, but they supply a clue. What is being abolished is autonomous man - the inner man, the homunculus, the possessing demon, the man defended by the literatures of freedom and dignity.

His abolition has long been overdue. Autonomous man is a device used to explain what we cannot explain in any other way. He has been constructed from our ignorance, and as our understanding increases, the very stuff of which he is composed vanishes. Science does not dehumanize man, it de-homunculizes him, and it must do so if it is to prevent the abolition of the human species. To man qua man we readily say good riddance. Only by dispossessing him can we turn to the real causes of human behavior. Only then can we turn from the inferred to the observed, from the miraculous to the natural, from the inaccessible to the manipulable.

A scientific analysis of behavior dispossesses autonomous man and turns the control he has been said to exert over to the environment. The individual may then seem particularly vulnerable. He is henceforth to be controlled by the world around him, and in large part by other men. Is he not then simply a victim? Certainly men have been victims, as they have been victimizers, but the word is too strong.

despoliation, which is by no means an essential consequence of interpersonal control. But even under benevolent control is the individual not at best a spectator who may watch what happens but is helpless to do anything about it? Is he not "at a dead end in his long struggle to control his own destiny"?

It is only autonomous man who has reached a dead end. Man himself may be controlled by his environment, but it is an environment which is almost wholly of his own making.

Some religions have made death more important by picturing a future existence in heaven or hell, but the individualist has a special reason to fear death, engineered not by a religion but by the literatures of freedom and dignity. It is the prospect of personal annihilation. The individualist can find no solace in reflecting upon any contribution which will survive him. He has refused to act for the good of others and is therefore not reinforced by the fact that others whom he has helped will outlive him. He has refused to be concerned for the survival of his culture and is not reinforced by the fact that the culture will long survive him. In the defense of his own freedom and dignity he has denied the contributions of the past and must therefore relinquish all claim upon the future.

If a person can no longer take credit or be admired for what he does, then he seems to suffer a loss of dignity or worth, and behavior previously reinforced by credit or admiration will undergo extinction. Extinction often leads to aggressive attack.